

## *The Making of the J.S. Bach Chaconne* *An Interpretation Celebrating the Preservation of the* *Earth, Ocean, and Sky*

The making of the *Chaconne* recording and video wasn't exactly easy, but it was completely worth every worry. There were some obstacles along the journey that I thought I'd share. Some of these obstacles—in fact, many—were of my own creation. But in the end, all was wonderful.

### **Location**

As I explained in my article *Reflections on J.S. Bach's Masterpiece - the Chaconne*, I knew that I not only wanted to rerecord the *Chaconne* but that it would also serve as a soundtrack for a video protesting climate change.

From the moment this idea came to me, I was certain that this video should be shot at the Kaupo Aina Aloha Church grounds. It is one of the most spiritually charged locations I know.



At Kaupo, the Haleakala mountain falls into the ocean (*Moana*), and the sky (*Wakea*) looms above us. The 'Iwa Birds fly over its vast canvas. Its raw power and beauty are palpable. The wind (*Makani*) races down from the mountain

and whips up from the ocean's waves. The sound of the wind and waves can be deafening.

It was my intention to relate each section of the *Chaconne* to the trinity of the earth, ocean, and sky.

As we know, J.S. Bach was a devout Christian. But I'm not quite certain that the trinity I just described was in Bach's mind as he composed the piece. It is thought that he composed the *Chaconne* as a kind of *Tombeau* to his deceased wife Maria Barbara. That being said, most Christians would agree that the earth, ocean, and sky are God's creations.

I hoped that having the church as an integral part of the video would acknowledge Bach's religion—hence my daughter Mitsuko's decision to include it in several shots. It is a gorgeous church in such a spectacular setting. In my travels throughout the islands, I observed that the missionaries picked the most gorgeous locations on which to construct their churches.

### **The Recording**

At the outset, I thought the soundtrack of the video would be the recording of the *Chaconne* from my CD, *Branches*. However, upon reflection, it seemed a bit disingenuous. That recording is ten years old. My feelings about the piece and life in general have changed drastically since. I'm not the same person I was ten years ago. Because of this, I wanted to make a new interpretation.

In early June I booked a date at Elm City Records, with Solomon Silber producing the session and Evan Bakke engineering.

The preparation for a recording is a bit different from that of a live performance. But after many days of practice and study I felt I was ready. I awoke the morning of, and off I went to the studio on the Metro North train.

I arrived at the studio to find the microphones already set up to begin the session. I dove into the first take. After a few passes through the first passage, I listened to the playback. The sound of the guitar seemed too bright.

I had not taken into consideration that it was a brand-new Gary Lee guitar, which still needed to be broken in. The top E string in particular was overly bright. This meant we had to spend some time adjusting the EQ.

After a good stretch of playing and listening, we decided to readjust the mikes. Such is the nature of recording. Sound can be a fickle friend. I began a second round of takes and got to the end of the piece. There were some bumps along the way, but after a couple of hours plus, we decided we had it. Thus began the editing process.

We knew pretty much what we wanted from the various takes and by about 7:00 PM we had the piece edited.

All were jubilant about a fine day's work. I boarded the train home more or less happy. The following morning, I must admit, I listened with a little trepidation. To my dismay, I just didn't think the performance was good enough. There were some strained passages, some odd phrasing, and some warts that I just could not live with. I called Sol and with a sigh he agreed. A big "ugh!"

Two days after the session, I was off to Maui to teach my annual summer master class. I had booked a shoot before the class with videographers Sean and Scott of Polyphonic Industries LLC. Because the recording was not ready, we had to cancel and reschedule. I knew I was returning to Hawaii in August for vacation with my wife and family so we booked a date for a month later before I was off to Korea. The June recording was officially retired.

In the interim, I worked arduously on the *Chaconne*. I played it for some dear friends, which helped me immensely. I studied it more intensely, making many new musical decisions. These were accompanied by several new fingerings. It ended up being a different interpretation than the *Chaconne* I recorded on *Branches*. By the second recording date in July, I was in an entirely different place with the piece.

This second session was exhilarating. Sol was adamant about capturing as live and performance-oriented a recording as possible. I had recently enjoyed recording in a more piecemeal way—for example, recording an isolated phrase and then another, editing as I go. In this manner, by the time you reach the end of the work, you are done recording and editing.

But Sol wanted none of that, and I was game. I did about six takes of the piece in one sitting. We edited very large chunks from essentially two takes. I believe they were the last two takes, as I got deeper and deeper into it the more I played.

We all know recordings are musical “snapshots” of a sort. They are documents of what we sound and feel like on that given day. Even though we think we can achieve perfection in a recording via editing, we can’t. There are always compromises.

That being said, I love the recording process and all of its challenges. Throughout the years, my recordings have served as important teachers in their own right. I regard it as a separate art from performing, yet the two can often meet, even in the confines of a studio.

### **The Video Shoot**

It is now August. I arrive on Oahu from London. Prior to that, I was in Korea. It had been a busy summer. My wife and I had planned a vacation on the north shore of Oahu. My mother-in-law, my son, and his girlfriend joined us.

All was great except for Mother Nature. She was acting up big time. There had been storms and more were on the horizon. Scott, Sean, and I had scheduled the shoot for two days after my arrival on the islands. This meant I had to travel to Maui from Oahu (a 20- minute flight), spend the night with some friends, and get up super early to head out to the location with Sean and Scott in order to have the proper lighting.

I had been practicing to my recording and was highly excited to finally do the shoot. The day after my arrival, I saw that the weather reports were not encouraging, to say the least. That same day, I got a call from Scott: “Dude... there is no way we can shoot out at Kaupo tomorrow. They are expecting crazy rain and winds. We have to reschedule. Sorry Brah” (Hawaiian for “Bro”)

The session was rescheduled for a few days later, this time on a Saturday. This meant, of course, cancelling my plane reservation (with an extra charge), rebooking my rental car, calling my friends to see if I could spend a different night at their house, and upsetting my family’s vacation plans.

The good news was that it allowed me more time to polish up the piece. Synching, as I learned firsthand, has its own peculiarities and needs to be practiced. My playing was quite spontaneous in the session. I had to spend hours matching exactly how I played it so that it would look right on camera, even though I had recorded it a month earlier.

I woke up on the day of the cancelled shoot only to find blazing sunshine! The storm had passed and didn’t hit any of the islands. It was a gorgeous day on Oahu and on Maui, so my mates told me. It would have been a perfect day for a shoot! “Drat,” as W.C. Fields used to say! I mean, I was happy there was no storm but...well, drat!

I woke up Friday to quite the rainy and stormy August day. As the day progressed, the weather report for the rescheduled shooting day called for high winds, big surf, and rain on all the islands.

I called Scott and he said in a serious tone: “There is no way, brah.”

Now, the only day we could possibly shoot would be the last day of our vacation — Monday, Labor Day, a national holiday. It had to be.

Thus began another rescheduling of the ticket, the rent-a-car, the friends, and my family. Another huge “ugh!”

Sunday evening arrived. I got on the plane to Maui, expecting great weather for Monday’s shoot.

After what seemed like an eternity waiting for my rent-a-car, I headed upcountry to spend the night with my friends Joe and Anita. Our mutual friend Jon was coming over for a great movie hang.

I planned to meet the guys at the recording site at 6:30am. It is a two-hour drive to Kaupo from upcountry. I awoke much earlier, in anticipation of the day. The drive to the site and the shoot in general had me overly excited and a bit nervous.

With the coffee made, clothes packed, and a great chair from Joe and Anita to sit on, I got in the car and began the day’s journey to meet Sean and Scott. We met at the Long’s parking lot and drove on in, caravan style.

What a glorious Maui morning! Rounding the corners of the descending Haleakala Mountain, the shiny morning sun accompanied the indescribable views of the landscape.

As we headed into Kaupo County we passed a church. Scott and Sean pulled over and asked if the church beside the road was “the” church, as it had been several years since they had been to the site. I said no and told them to follow...this was my first mistake. We wanted the Aina Aloha Church, also known as the Hualoha Church of Kaupo, which was about 5 miles further on.



As I drive I notice the road becoming unpaved and bumpy. I then came to a slight drop—or so it seemed—where the road was washed out from countless storms. Clearly this road had not been tended to for years.

I hesitated for only a millisecond and decided rather impetuously to proceed. Forward I went, and suddenly I dropped into this washed-out road. My heart both sank and began to pound. I tried to avoid the large protruding boulders by attempting to drive on the side of the road that appeared the most clear. But the sound of branches from the bushes brushing up against the car doors only added to my panic.

I arrived at the bottom of the road after what felt like an hour. There before me in all its glory lay the church, the ocean, the palm trees, and Haleakala as a back drop. It was just as remembered it.

I couldn’t, however, feel any real satisfaction or joy, because I was painfully aware that I had just done something really stupid. I realized that getting back out of here and up the road was going to be.... well.... A BIG PROBLEM.

Scott and Sean were thankfully much wiser. Oh how I wished I had let them continue to lead!!!

I saw them walking down the road. They approached. "Dude???" On both their faces was a look of disbelief.

I cut them off: "I know, I know, really bad move...I feel like a complete idiot."

So before we could film anything, we had to try to get my car back up the hill. At that moment, I reminded myself that I was paying these guys to make a video, not to drive my rent-a-car back up a washed-out country road.

I immediately asked Sean to get behind the wheel. Gunning a minivan (the rent-a-car company upgraded me) on slick dirt roads with boulders lurching was something I just knew I wouldn't be good at. Besides, Sean is a cool and calm type of fellow, the kind you want with you when the chips are down. Scott was much the same, but he was suffering from a bad cut on his foot and was having trouble walking.



So, Sean gunned it. It got a few feet with ease, giving me a wee bit of hope. "Yes," I thought to myself, but then came that wonderful sound of wheels spinning in the mud. The mud flew everywhere and the car barely moved. He braked. We all pondered and strategized in stunned silence.

We tried to find a palm tree branch to put under the wheel for traction, or at least some dry rocks. But there had been some passing rain clouds delivering a gentle rain, which made the road and all else that much wetter. Great!

Scott and I tried to give the car a push at Sean's command. I have little to no upper-body strength. I lamented this and thought to myself that more time at the gym would have paid off right about now!

Sean gave it another blast, but it amounted to nothing—nothing but mud flying and the sound of wheels spinning.

By now, I wasn't feeling great at all. In fact, I wanted to cry!

We agreed that we would have to try and find a towing company. We made the decision that Sean and I would drive as far as we needed to, to get a signal for the phone and Scott would stay behind and get the equipment set up for the shoot, should it actually happen.

Keep in mind the fact that we were in the middle of nowhere! The recording site was in a very remote part of the island. To get cell phone service we had to drive a few miles to the Kaupo General Store. It is a wonderful little store, a kind of oasis that sells drinks, etc. But of course, it was closed for the holiday.

We pulled into the parking lot. Sean started calling the two tow companies that he knew. The first company told us they couldn't and wouldn't come out that far on this day. My heart sank as I heard Sean try to plead with them.

I could barely keep it together. I was so angry with myself. I kept replaying the scene back in my head, thinking that if I had just waited only a second more and observed that there wasn't that much further to go, I could have walked. It was the familiar set of counterfactuals: "woulda, coulda, shoulda." All the while the clock was still ticking. We were supposed to be making a video not calling towing companies!

Sean finally got through to Ted, the owner of the East Maui Towing and Transport Co. As I sat next to Sean I felt a glimmer of hope. He looked over at me and said, "He will do it for \$600 and he needs your credit card number now to see if it will clear."

Ah... welcome to capitalism. But Ted was the only one who would come out this far. What was I going to say, no? Of course, I said yes, and my card cleared. A sense of relief washed over me. Help was finally on the way. Sean and I drove back to the site. As we pulled in Sean instructed me to stay by the side of the road to flag the tow truck man down. It would be just our luck to have him not find the place and return to his garage.

We agreed that some time was needed at any rate to set up and shoot some B roll. So, there I was by the side of the road. I tried to seek shade as the morning sun was blazing, but there was little real shade to be had. Below you will see some pictures of the roadside I got to know so well. I remember discovering a centipede. You don't want to be stung by this critter. I filmed him as he shimmied his way to Café Centipede or wherever he needed to go. He was a momentary companion of sorts.

I thought to myself, this is a time when all my years of meditation and spiritual practice must pay off! I simply had to accept the situation. As I waited I tried to meditate, but there was no comfortable place to sit. I did tons of breathing exercises instead, which indeed helped.

As the minutes passed and passed, I realized that it was entirely possible that we might not shoot the video after all, that by the time we got the car out it would be time for me to head back to the airport.

I then began thinking of all the people who had *real* problems. After all, I was not harmed, nothing was threatening my life—not the weather and not even the centipede. The worst that could happen was that Ted would not get the car out, I would have to pay for the car in some manner, possibly not get a flight back to Oahu, and finally not make the video I so desperately wanted to make.

After an hour and ten minutes, quite a few cars had passed, but no truck! I wanted to see and hear that tow truck! Then finally, I did. Praise Sweet Baby Jesus and Buddha and all deities and humanity! Music came forth from the sky, birds begin to sing, and choirs of angels joined them as dolphins, sea turtles, walruses, whales, and all manner of maritime life jumped from the sea. The earth was dancing! At least, I thought it was.

The shiny tow truck was before me at last. I was already thinking of ways to propose marriage to Ted behind the wheel. My knight in shining armor, my savior tells me to get in. It's a big truck and just getting in required a bit of effort.

I climbed up and in. Behind the wheel, indeed, was Brave Sir Ted. I figured he was probably about my age, but I couldn't tell and didn't ask. He's a Haole (the term for a non-Polynesian) as I am, but also rugged and built like a house, as I am not. I sensed that he might be originally from the west coast, but I wasn't sure.

The minute I got in my seat, Ted starts in on me. Ted: "You know I'm saving your ass."

Me: "Oh yeah, I know. I know, thanks, seriously."

Ted: "No, I'm serious; I'm saving your ass. You think anyone else would come out here in the middle of nowhere on Labor Day? Huh?"

Me: "I get it ... I can't thank you enough"

As the truck continued down the road, tree branches and shrubs were rubbing up against the truck as they did my rent-a-car.

Ted: "This is my new truck, damn it. and it better not get scratched! You know, I don't even know if I can get you out! You know that, don't you?"

This, my friends, is not what I wanted to hear. Let's just say I wasn't feeling a lot of love right about now.

I sigh a defeated, "Yeah."

Ted: "What the hell is the matter with you? Why did you drive down this road?"

I was being reprimanded like a schoolboy. Believe me when I tell you it conjured up tons of bad grammar school memories.

But the fact of the matter is, Ted just asked the million-dollar question: why did I? Pondering the question only briefly, I looked straight into Ted's sun-glassed eyes and said: "Because I'm an asshole. Hey, I don't own a car; I play the guitar and live in New York City."

Ted looked at me and paused, a wee smile appearing on his face, and replied: "Ah, don't worry man, I've bailed the same guy out going down the same road 5 times! I've seen worse than you."

I feel a little better. Not much, but a little.

We arrived at the top of the road and looked down at my poor rent-a-car. Sean came up to meet Ted. Scott was still out getting some more B-roll and scouting out where I might sit. Sean began a wee bit of congenial banter with Ted. He mentioned a mutual friend, but Ted was not all that impressed.

At this point another man appeared. Clearly, he was local. He turned out to be Sam Aina. The guys and I didn't realize whose property we were on. Not only that, we needed permission to film or do anything here. A small oversight on my part!

Sam's great grandfather helped build the church in 1859. I believe Sam told me his great grandmother used to teach in the little schoolhouse whose ruins are visible in the shoot. In short, there was an impressive amount of family history tying Sam to this land, and we needed his permission.

We explained to him what we were doing. Sam could not have demonstrated more Aloha spirit. He opened the church in case we wanted to use it. In addition, he informed us that various distinguished Hawaiian musicians had come here for inspiration. Songs had previously been written on these grounds. I was not alone in thinking this was a cosmic place.

Meanwhile, back at the scene of the crime, Ted assessed the situation as the wind howled. I was now feeling a bit better and hoping that maybe, just maybe, we would get the car to safety and move onwards to the shoot. Maybe....

Now began the tow. Ted instructed Sean and me to grab a hold of a cable. We both grabbed it. Immediately I felt the greasiness of the cable—and it was damn hard to pull. I realized quickly that I couldn't continue—it hurt like hell and was crazy greasy.

I look at Sean and pleaded: "Brah, I actually have to play and this grease is not going to make it easy or even possible."

Sean, being an incredible gentleman and a true mate in a time of need, understood and granted me a pass.

Alone, Sean pulled the cable down to the car, which was a good distance from the truck. He attached it on to the car.

I was now told to get in the rent-a-car and steer in the direction they ordered. I should mention that I barely know my left from my right. Since I was young, I confused the two. Gym school drills were a disaster! That aside, I was up for the challenge. I had little choice.

The towing began. It felt like a Disney ride of sorts. Ever so slowly, the car moved. Too damn exciting! Inch by inch we moved, even slower than my centipede friend.

Shouts from Captain Ted were heard from above: "A bit to the left...even it out...that's good...Easy!"

As we got all the way up to dry land, I wept. Could it be? Ah, did I love the miracle of industry and the expertise of an experienced tower during these times!

I'm sure Ted had numerous other skills that could help folks in a jam, but as far as my situation was concerned, the man was the Heifetz of towers.

The car was up and safe. I signed the proper papers and practically proposed to Ted. He gave us all an East Maui Towing and Transport Co. keychain ring. This I shall always cherish.

Off Ted drove, his truck glistening in the late morning sun, and we proceeded down the road to the site. We looked at the clock and thought we could fit in possibly two or three passes of Bach's (remember him?) mighty *Chaconne* before I had to head out to the airport, which was over two hours away.



I changed into my mother-in-law's beautiful shirt and tried to play a few notes. The guitar and strings felt foreign, but there was no time to be fussy or worry.

The wind was so blustering that at one point it almost knocked me over when I rose from my chair.

Sean yelled: "Hey, do you want a comb?"

I laughed. When you see the video, you will too. I'm proposing that this was the windiest guitar video ever made. I challenge any guitarist to make a video with this much wind in it!

One thing I didn't have to worry about during this shoot was my hair. Mother Nature would take of that.

The guys had brought a large self-powered speaker. They blasted my recording, which was barely loud enough for me to play with, given the sound of the wind and waves crashing.



At one point, I yelled at the wind and surf to keep it down so that I could hear my recording. They could care less. Who do they think they are?

We decided on three separate locations where I would play. The sun was relentless, but occasionally clouds blocked it. This made for some dramatic lighting. We were thrilled it didn't rain, as it often can

at any moment in Kaupo.

After three takes we decided to wrap. The clock was ticking and I had to get to the airport and back to Oahu where my dear patient wife would fetch me. We had planned to have a nice quiet last night on the North Shore of Oahu, an hour away from the airport. I did not want to screw that up!

I changed my clothes, thanked and hugged two of the most noble and fantastic videographers I know, and walked up the now familiar road to my "saved" rent-a-car.

I had driven this road before. It can be quite precarious and even dangerous if one is not careful. But I had a plane to catch. Most tourists drive slowly to take in the breathtaking sights. The locals speed by them when they can; they live there and have work to do. But for this drive, I was a local and drove as fast as I could.

Besides returning the car, I had to return the chair to Joe and Anita! There was no time to do that, so I called my mate Jon who agreed to meet me at a specific place on the Haleakala highway. He would deliver the chair later.

Jon asked how the shoot went over cell phone, as I bombed along the long and winding roads of East Maui.

I replied, "You have no idea, mate!"

The "Bach chair" was successfully delivered, I caught my plane, and we had a great final evening of our vacation.

Many angels appeared that day, not the least of which was my wife Rie. I got lucky many times over.

Why do we do what we do? I think the answer is sometimes that we have no choice, or... do we?

Peace, love, Bach, Maui, and great friends!

*Ben*

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